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ABSTRACT

Possible causes for the discrepancy between the ABT report on the national Project Follow Through and the Saint Louis, Missouri program were discussed: (1) ABT data were positively biased because of non-random, differential attrition from the program and control groups; (2) positive ABT data were due to use of a particular cohort group; or (3) local data were negatively biased because of the evaluation design. To examine sources of conflict, a databank was instituted, using old classroom rosters and available standardized test results through grade 5. The first hypothesis was upheld; each ABT group was above the district average and the non-ABT groups were below. The hypothesis that studying a particular cohort group caused the discrepancy was not confirmed. It was determined that previous local evaluation data provided clues to possible forms of bias. The poorest results for Follow Through Classes were centered on first grade students and led to speculation that students needed time to become acclimated to responsive education models. Two suggestions based on this study were made: affective based education may produce unusual patterns of academic growth, and the non-terminal nature of specific programs must be recognized. (RH)

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Following Through on Follow Through

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The Abt report on the national Follow Through Program has caused considerable stir in the educational community. Of particular note has been debate about the model categories used in the report, the inferences made about those categories, and their implications for the structure of primary education.

The St. Louis Program, using the Far West Laboratory's Responsive Education Model--one of Abt's "affective" group--was put in an uneasy position as a result of the report. Academically, St. Louis appeared to be the most productive site for a model with an overall poor showing. Yet, despite a rather good report card from Abt, the report caused some consternation among the local evaluation staff; according to local data, the program had never appeared to be particularly successful academically.

The publication of the Abt report inspired the local Follow Through evaluators to reexamine the question of academic achievement in the local Follow Through effort. Either Abt or the local evaluation staff was apparently misjudging the St. Louis Follow Through program.

A number of causes for the local-national discrepancy were hypothesized, but the most intuitively appealing were:

1. The Abt data were positively biased because of non-random, differential attrition from the program and control groups. The period over which the Abt cohort group was experiencing Responsive Education coincided with the decline and fall of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing project which was adjacent to both Follow Through schools. The systematic attrition of

this lower SES population from the study's treatment group was clearly a potential source of bias.

2. The positive data in the Abt report had been due to fortuitous choice to examine Cohort III-k (Follow-Through students entering kindergarten in the fall of 1971).

3. The local data were negatively biased as a result of the evaluation design. After monitoring implementation fidelity in some detail, a small local evaluation budget allowed only for an annual analysis of the system-administered standarized test results. In general these results had found Follow-Through students below not only national norms but below comparable students in their own homogeneous sub-district.

Previous local evaluation data from these annual studies had provided clues to possible forms of bias. The poorest showings for Follow Through classes had usually come at grade 1. This led to speculation that the Responsive Education model necessitated some acclimation on the part of students. It appeared that while Follow Throughers were still learning to be "responsive" during their first grade Follow Through year, students in more traditional classes in the remainder of the district were learning more of those "basics" which paid off better at testing time.

To examine these potential sources of local-Abt conflict, we instituted a Follow Through data bank based on old classroom rosters. Each Follow Through student was classified by cohort and pattern of Follow Through experience. Students who had spent less than two years in Follow Through were deleted from the sample used for analysis. Since the notion of acclimation suggested a study of long-term academic growth patterns, available standardized test results for each student were recorded through grade five, two years beyond the end of the program experience. This data bank became the primary source for an ex post facto study of academic achievement in Follow Through.

The hypothesis of non-random attrition was examined through calculation of achievement test averages for those members of the Abt group Cohort III-K's (who had stayed in their schools of initial enrollment) and an attrition group (who left their initial enrollment location but stayed within the school system). In the spring of the third grade year the transient non-Abt group trailed the Abt sample by 4 months in Reading and Language and 2 months in Mathematics. In each case the Abt group was above the district average and the non-Abt group was below.

The second (but related) hypothesis that Cohort III had been a fortuitous choice for study by Abt was not upheld. Of the first five Cohort groups, Cohort III was, overall, the second highest in academic achievement at grade 3 but did not differ markedly from average Follow Through performance.

The acclimation theory implied at least two hypothetical models for achievement growth that could be investigated:

1. While the majority of children in Follow Through were on-going Follow Through participants, some students in each room were inevitably new to the program. If each new Follow-Througher was spending a year or two adjusting to the responsive environment, overall Follow Through scores were being watered down by the poorer results coming from these acclimating students.

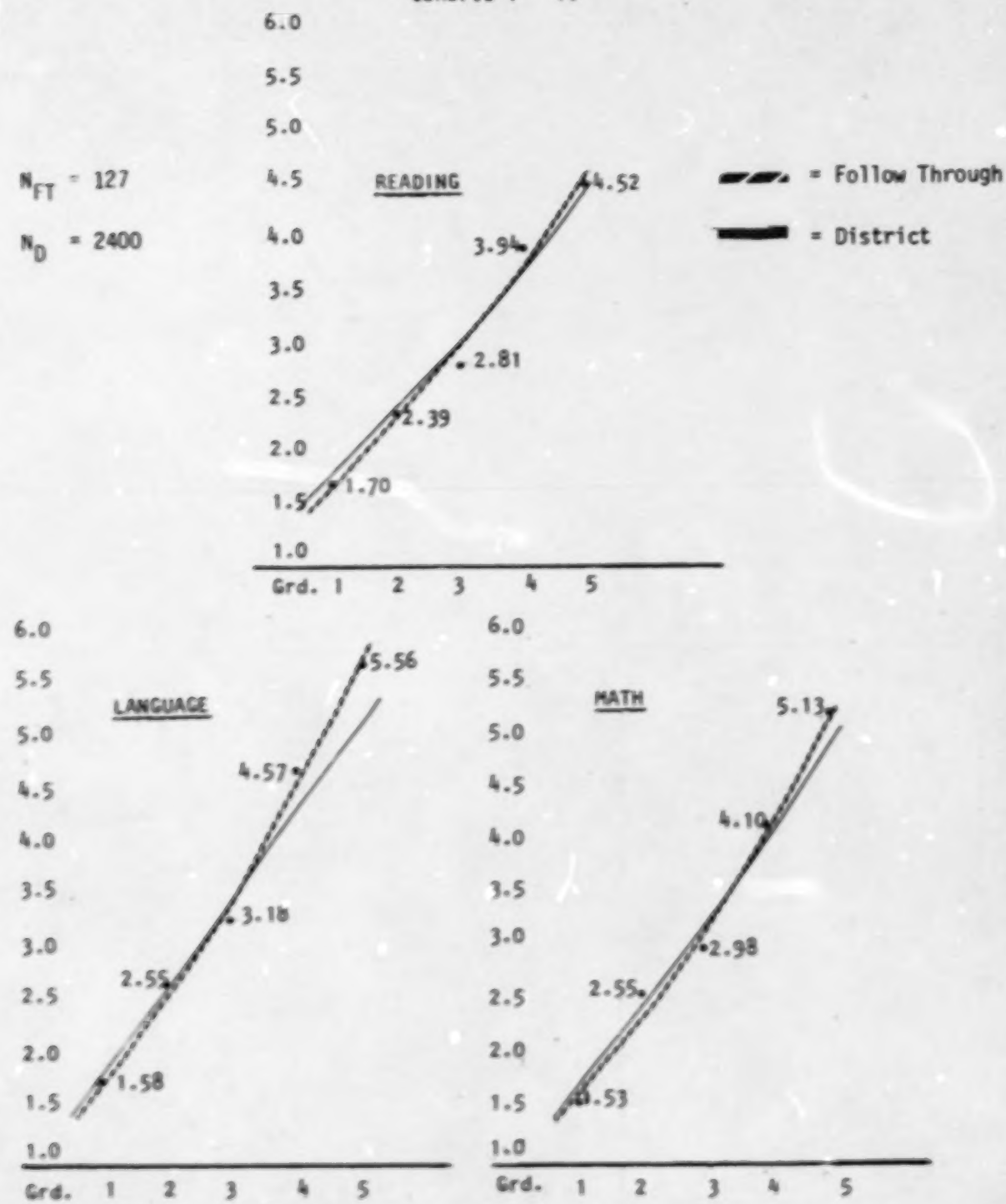
2. Second, it was plausible that the overall growth pattern of Follow Through youngsters was one of positive acceleration. This would suggest that Responsive Education's emphasis on affective growth would be reflected in the early school years in lower test scores but with these deficits eventually made-up (or even reversed) at some time in the future.

The plausibility of the first model was investigated by comparing the mean data base scores to those that had been reported yearly for each grade. The discrepancies noted seemed to be random in nature. It appeared that no systematic "watering down" had occured; in fact, the acclimating students, coming from a more cognitive orientation seemed to have increased score levels as often as they decreased them.

In exploring the second acclimation model it was of particular interest to note the pattern of academic gains from the final program year (grade three) through grade five. In each of the first four cohort groups--those classes who had now completed grade five--a pattern of positively accelerated growth was noted. When averaged out over cohorts, this pattern showed students going from a significant deficit in basic skills (with respect to already deficient district norms) to a significant advantage over these norms by grade five. These results appear on the following pages.

Figure 1

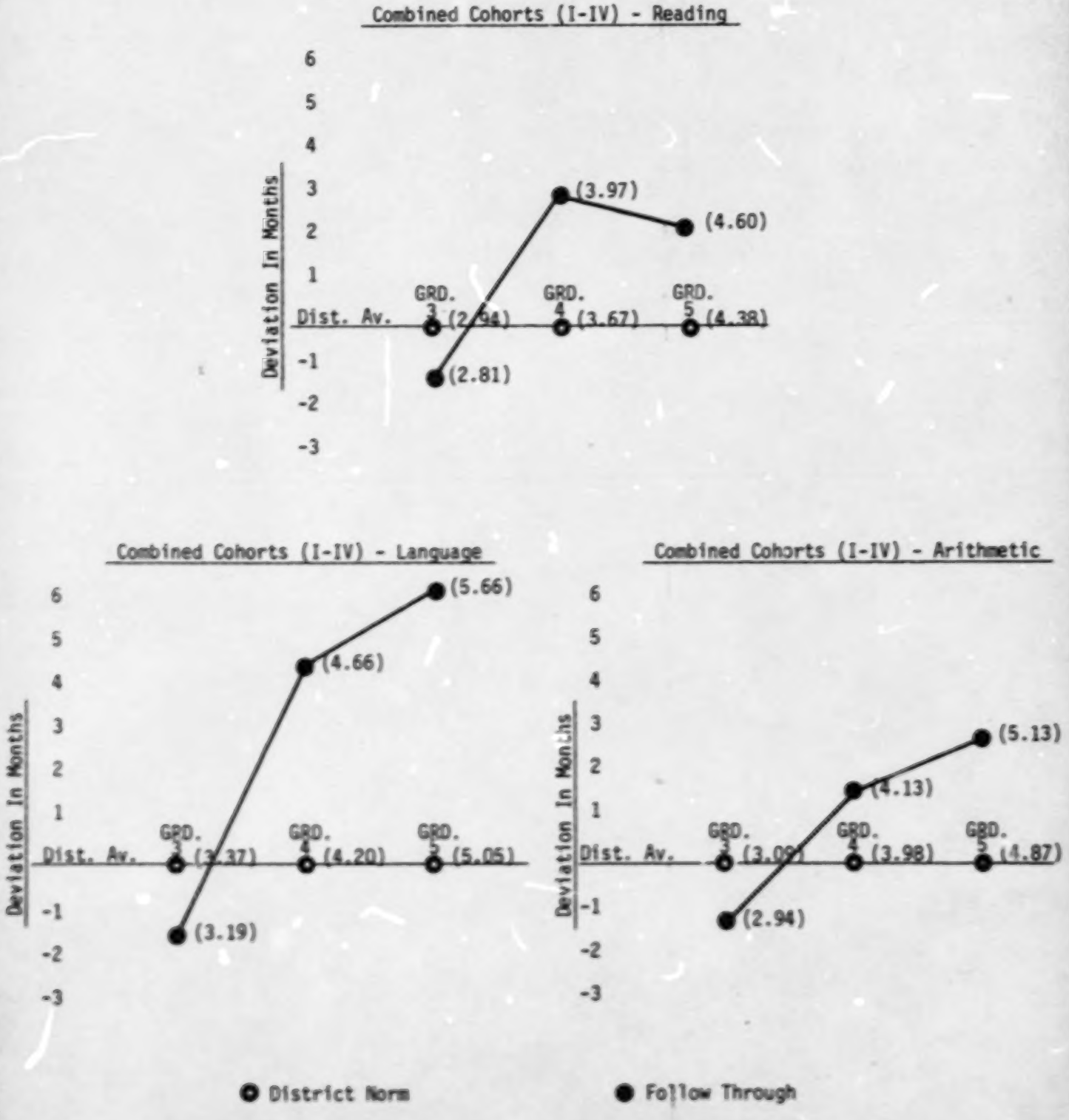
Follow Through - District Longitudinal Comparisons*
Cohorts I - IV



*ITBS Test

Figure 2

Deviation In Months Between The Follow Through Cohort Groups & District Norms



Three aspects of our analysis need to be noted. First, we have intentionally downplayed statistical inference and mathematical modeling at this point in our investigations. The samples on which the charts are based are of sufficient size that the standard errors of the various Follow Through means are about three-fourths of an academic month (.075 years). At the grade extremes, scores usually do go from what would be "significant" Follow Through deficit to a "significant" advantage. The plots of the Follow Through means do have a non-linear component entering the regression with about 90% confidence. Due to the ex post facto nature of our work, however, we are not about to claim to have proved anything.

Second, there are some uncontrolled variables that cannot be ruled out as causal agents for the observed effects. One such cause that has occured to us is that there might have been some school level abnormality in the test administrations in grades four and five. Specifically, we wondered whether some teacher(s) might have done some data "editing." We did check one particular cohort/grade/school combination that showed some alarming year-to-year gains but the results of the investigation were not conclusive.

Third, we are still in the process of cleaning up our data. After a change of local Follow Through administrators a few years ago, many old records were lost or misplaced. Each child we can absolutely tie to a particular experience-cohort combination represents a minor victory to us. We expect this process to be completed by the end of this year.

While we make no claim to have "proved" anything, these results are consistent with logical models for growth that could be based on independent findings about the Far West Laboratory's Responsive Education Model.

In Stallings' (1975) study of the Follow Through planned variation experiment, Responsive Education rated highly in independence and Intellectual Achievement Responsibility (Success) Scale. In some studies done locally we have also been able to see positive results in what we have called Academic Self-Concept. If such motivational constructs are the necessary ingredient to a successful follow-up of the Headstart program, an accelerated pattern of later growth would be a very plausible one.

Over the next three months we plan to expand the data base to grade six and add one more cohort group that will have completed grade five. To the degree that a number of the uncontrolled factors in the Follow Through program continue to change over time, our future investigations will have less confounding/nesting problems. If we continue to find similar growth patterns in later cohort groups, it will clearly lend more credence to our hypothesis.

The results of this study suggest two important points. First, affective-based learning programs may engender unusual patterns of academic growth. Evaluators of school programs should take note of this possibility, even to the extent of assisting in developing academic objectives that are based on such a model for basic skills development. Second, programs that are clearly non-terminal in nature must be examined accordingly. The students leaving the program are not intended to be finished products; a primary student who is deficient in basic skills is no tragedy if his expectation for the later acquisition of such skills has been improved as a result of his educational experience.

Reference

STALLINGS, JANE. Implementation and Child Effects of Teaching Practices in Follow Through Classrooms. With Commentary by MILLIE ALMY, and by LAUREN B. RESNICK and GAEA LEINHARDT. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 1975, 40(7-8, Serial No. 163).